

Caring for the Commons: Craft Against Plastic
by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION.....	4
II. BACKGROUND.....	8
III. THEORETICAL APPLICATIONS.....	12
<i>Issues in the Anthropocene</i>	12
<i>Environmental Philosophy</i>	17
<i>Topics in Value Theory</i>	22
IV. ACTIONS TAKEN	27
V. ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND CHALLENGES	29
IV. WORKS CITED	32

In this time of extinctions, we are going to be asked again and again to take a stand for life, and this means taking a stand for faith in life's meaningfulness. We are called to live within faith that there are patterns beyond our known patterns and that, in the midst of all that we do not know, we also gain knowledge. We are called to acknowledge that in the midst of all we cannot choose, we also make choices. And we are called into recognition: of the shimmer of life's pulses and the great patterns within which the power of life expresses itself. We are therefore called into gratitude for the fact that in the midst of terrible destruction, life finds ways to flourish, and that the shimmer of life does indeed include us.

---Deborah Bird Rose, "Shimmer. When All You Love is Being Trashed"

1. Introduction

My aim in this Civic Engagement Project (CEP hereafter) is twofold. On the one hand, it has been an attempt to explore theoretically the contradiction between individual action and its (oftentimes non-existent) effects on the large scale of things (on a societal and environmental level). On the other hand, I looked at how this tension plays out on a practical level, attending particularly to the issue of single-use plastic pollution. In this regard, the project unfolded in the following practical way: I organized and lead two workshops in which participants create reusable tote bags from old t-shirts, encouraging them to reduce reliance on single-use plastic bags in everyday life while conversing about the meaning of individual actions in the context of environmentalism.

I want to bring to the fore that this project is not grounded in environmental pragmatism—even if, at heart, there is a desire to *do something*, to *change something* in the way we currently live, produce and consume. The possibility that actions based solely on pragmatism, however well-intentioned, may end up functioning as mere “band-aids” within a system where the foundations remain intact is profoundly troubling for me. As the utterly famous Audre Lorde tells us: “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.”¹ Her words suggest that, instead of band-aids, we need genuine change, and thus one may intuit that such a change can only come about from a shift in a deeper level, that we need to strive for a full destruction reconstruction of the underlying foundations that structure the world we inhabit.

¹ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, 112.

This might appear enticing. We might want to do something to halt the forces of domination and the capitalist system that sustains itself through extractivism and the degradation of nature. We might believe in the importance of participating in small individual actions or grassroots activism: deciding to not eat meat, participating in the protests organized by Fridays for Future, bringing your own cup or thermos to avoid generating yet another disposable container for a coffee to go, or even having a conversation with your conservative uncle during Christmas dinner to try to convince him about the reality of climate change is real—even if you know he won't listen. *Yet it is also profoundly disheartening.* Even if we strive to brush our ways of living in late capitalism in first world countries against the grain, the force of hegemony seems to absorb everything. In this context, it seems that very few points of fracture remain. What, then, is the weight of our actions against this machinic engine that seems to devour all the efforts made by many grass-root activism?

In 1933, in the context of a Europe that was engulfed in fascism, philosopher Simone Weil wrote an essay titled *Reflections on War*. There, she narrated the absurdity of fighting against fascism employing the very same tools that fascism employed—those of war and force. In her own words: “Our society resembles an immense machine that ceaselessly snatches and devours human beings... And they who sacrifice themselves for social progress are like persons who try to catch hold of the wheels and the transmission belts in order to stop the machine and are destroyed in their attempts.”² Thus, every attempt at reform appears puerile, futile, in the face of the blind necessities implied by such a monstrous social machine. Yet, for Weil, *we mustn't renounce action*. She continues to argue that

² Simone Weil, “Reflections on War,” 190.

the impotence one feels today—an impotence we should never consider permanent—does not excuse one from remaining true to oneself, nor does it excuse capitulation to the enemy, whatever mask he may wear. Whether the mask is labelled Fascism, Democracy, or Dictatorship of the Proletariat, our great adversary remains The Apparatus—the bureaucracy, the police, the military. Not the one facing us across the frontier or the battlelines, which is not so much our enemy as our brothers’ enemy, but the one that calls itself our protector and makes us its slaves. No matter what the circumstances, the worst betrayal will always be to subordinate ourselves to this Apparatus, and to trample underfoot, in its service, all human values in ourselves and in others.³

Writing, as she was, in the midst of Nazism, in Vichy’s France, Weil is an example of someone that was aware of the extreme degree of the world’s moral downfall, yet she refused to give up her confidence in the possibility of moral restoration. In fact, her continuing struggle can be seen precisely as an attempt to retain hope in the midst of increasing hopelessness. She had a lucid appreciation of the crisis, and still maintained a committed search for a solution, never giving up her involvement with the moral welfare of the world.

While comparing the emergence of fascism to present-day plastic production and waste might seem odd—and it should be clear that by no means it is my intention to compare plastic pollution to fascism here—I want to take Weil’s words as an inspiration for my CEP’s ‘philosophical action-plan’. In a time where hopelessness and apathy are on the rise—as philosopher Johanna Oksala tells us, “According to a recent poll, 71% of American millennials, for example, reported that climate change was negatively affecting their mental health, as well as

³ Simone Weil, “Reflections on War,” 191.

influencing major life decisions such as their career paths and decisions to have children”⁴—, there is something to be said about maintaining hope in the face of hopelessness. Perhaps, then, even when large-scale transformation appears distant and impossible, there is a certain fidelity to human and ecological values that must not be abandoned—and it is in this sense that Weil’s account of an absolute commitment to a moral good under structural domination become particularly illuminating.

There is more, however: not only do we need to embrace and care for that hope and that confidence in the possibility of moral betterment, we also need to make clear that it is about actually doing something with such hope in desperate times—and not only about maintaining it. Thus, the CEP is precisely about upholding such hope while also developing a practice that helps articulate it further, creating meaningful forms of action within our community—actions capable of turning the task of becoming more environmentally virtuous into something that genuinely matters to us.

⁴ “Irrespective of how likely or wide in scope the possibility of civilization collapse is estimated to be, an acute awareness of this possibility is inevitably starting to weigh heavily on the general public. Survey data clearly shows that the acknowledgement that human civilization could be hurdling towards global collapse generates a widespread sense of anxiety, hopelessness, and apathy, increasingly referred to by the terms “ecoanxiety” and “climate anxiety.” This is particularly significant among young people, whose future will be impacted the most. “Johanna Oksala, “The Existential Threat of Climate Change: From Climate Anxiety to Post-Nihilist Politics,” 192.

2. Background Context and Plan

That plastics pose a danger to the environment and to all its creatures is well-known. As the Geneva Environment Network state in their website, “plastics are negatively affecting people and the environment at each stage of their lifecycle –extraction of fossil fuel, production, manufacturing, use, recycling and disposal. The impacts are felt in a wide range of areas, including biodiversity, climate change, human health and human rights.”⁵ Microplastics are everywhere, and “according to WWF, an average person could be ingesting approximately 5 grams of plastic every week.”⁶ Microplastics are endocrine disruptors, which means that they can affect reproductive health or cause cognitive impairment. Research has also linked microplastics to cancer.

Of course, this not only applies to humans, but also to all other living creatures on this planet. The effects of plastic pollution on seabirds is utterly devastating; they are possibly the most affected by it. It is estimated that between 15 to 51 trillion pieces of plastic are in the oceans, and, unfortunately, seabirds tend to eat it more than other animals: they often confuse plastic debris for food. As the organization Ocean Blue Project states in their website, while “In the 1960s, less than 5% of birds were found with plastic in their stomach...twenty years later, over 80% of birds had plastic in their stomach.” Currently, “an estimated *one million birds die as a result of plastic every year.*” But it will get worse: “it is projected that by 2050 99% of seabird

⁵ Geneva Environment Network. “Plastics and Health.” Accessed May 2026.

<https://www.genevaenvironmentnetwork.org/resources/updates/plastics-and-health/>.

⁶ Geneva Environment Network. “Plastics and Health.” Accessed May 2026.

<https://www.genevaenvironmentnetwork.org/resources/updates/plastics-and-health/>.

species will be ingesting plastic.”⁷ There is a patent urgency about this environmental issue that is taking so many lives.

Many organizations—such as Break Free from Plastic movement, the World Wildlife Fund, the Surfrider Foundation or the Ellen MacArthur Foundation—are putting together efforts to combat plastic pollution. One of their focuses has to do with advocating for a reduction of single use plastics and the recycling of all plastics. Break Free from Plastic underlines that single-use plastic production must stop if we want to begin moving towards real solutions to plastic pollution—and they advocate for Zero Waste approaches and reuse-and refill systems. To give a practical example, in their webpage they showcase a number of different reusable materials implementation efforts across Latin America, from Mexico to Argentina.

Within the context of the Missoula community, one organization that is actively making efforts to diminish single-use plastics is the University of Montana’s Sustainability office. The sustainability office at UM has been working on helping the university move towards zero-waste. In relation to this, I have personally participated in their zero-waste ambassadors’ program, where a group of students oversaw and promoted adequate separation of waste during events such as American football games. One of the biggest concerns for the sustainability office was the contamination of the compost bins, because this makes composting more difficult, and sometimes deems entire loads of waste unusable. Currently, one of their biggest campaigns focuses on pushing the University towards pledging Zero-Waste, which would signal a strong

⁷ Ocean Blue Project, “The Effects of Plastic Pollution on Seabirds,” accessed May 27, 2026,

<https://oceanblueproject.org/the-effects-of-plastic-p-on-seabirds/>.

institutional commitment to a long-term strategy of reducing landfill plastic waste through the use single-use containers made of composting materials.

These concerns and efforts, however, transcend the limits of our university campus. The city of Missoula adopted the Zero by 2050 plan and goal for zero waste in 2018. This encouraged initiatives to work “with local businesses, events, and Missoula residents to reduce and reuse, and to compost and recycle what’s left.”⁸ Missoula, then, is characteristically a city that is already concerned with these issues, a place where there is a desire to work to reduce waste at the institutional level.

However, despite these local efforts, the truth is that Montana recycles only 17% of its waste—well below the national average of 34%—and local organizations suggest Missoula’s recycling rate may fall even below that state figure.⁹ Even if recycling rates were higher, the process of recycling is problematic in itself: it offers only a temporary reprieve. As Hannah Ritchie notes in *Not the End of the World*, recycled plastic is rarely processed more than once or twice, and most of it undergoes mechanical recycling, which degrades its quality with each cycle. Eventually, even recycled plastic becomes waste. It is clear, then, that recycling merely delays the problem. This points to a more fundamental conclusion: the priority must be to produce less waste in the first place, rather than to manage the waste we continue to generate.

⁸ Home Resource. “Zero by Fifty (Zero Waste Plan).” Accessed May 2026. <https://www.homeresource.org/zero-waste-leadership/>

⁹ Home ReSource, “Zero Waste Missoula,” accessed May 27, 2026, <https://www.homeresource.org/zero-waste-missoula/>.

In my contribution, I have been inspired by the abovementioned organizations, local and global. My project situates itself within this broader constellation of efforts, focusing on encouraging reduction of single-use plastics. I did this by organizing and leading DIY crafting workshops where the group will create their own tote bags from old t-shirts. In line with Break Free from Plastic's advocacy in favor of reuse and refill systems, I wanted to organize an activity grounded in simplicity. My initial idea had been to lead a macramé workshop—a craft I have practiced since I was eighteen—in which participants would create their own bags out of cotton cord. However, this would have required purchasing new materials, which seemed to undercut the very purpose of the exercise. Like Thoreau, who reduced his life at Walden Pond to its most bare essentials in order to confront only what was necessary, I wanted to make the project as simple as possible. The solution presented itself in the form of something everyone already has at home: old t-shirts. Rather than acquiring anything new, participants could bring a discarded shirt and, with nothing more than a pair of scissors, transform it into a reusable bag.

The first workshop took place at UM's FLAT (Forum for Living with Appropriate Technology) house. UM FLAT is a space where an intentional living-learning community of students that focuses on everyday sustainability lives. Part of their mission consists of being a space to support campus and Missoula community members in leading more ecologically responsible lives.¹⁰ Drawing on their existing efforts and on their commitment to fostering a more environmentally conscious community, I organized a small workshop in the form of a crafting circle. In this space, I guided participants in creating tote bags from reused t-shirts while

¹⁰ University of Montana FLAT. "Forum for Living with Appropriate Technology." Accessed May 2026.

<https://www.umt.edu>.

also facilitating a philosophical discussion on the meaning (or possible meaninglessness) of small individual actions, as well as on the relevance of cultivating kindness toward nature as part of living ethical lives and flourishing as human beings and members of the broader planetary community.

The second workshop was an adaptation of the first one for kids, where the focus was on presenting the practice of zero-waste, of reuse and DIY as a fun and joyful activity so kids would resonate with it and want to embrace it. We did it at Sussex School as part of their 2026 Climate and Arts Symposium Day—a day in which students partake in different ecologically-driven activities. Thus, the workshop helped build an environment in which students engage with environmental issues.

3. Theoretical Applications

Issues in the Anthropocene

The most germane theoretical inspiration for this project is drawn from the course PHL 515—“Issues in the Anthropocene.” More precisely, it sprouts from Steven Vogel’s 2015 book *Thinking Like a Mall. Environmental Philosophy After the End of Nature*. Throughout the book, Vogel challenges the conceptual boundary between the “natural realm” and the “(humanly) constructed world” and argues against the use of the concept of ‘nature’—especially as it is used in the context of environmental philosophy, as a realm of distant otherness that has little or nothing to do with us ‘civilized’ humans.

The concept of ‘nature’, as he warns us, can be dualistic, confusing and distracting: we ought not turn to a realm beyond the human in order to think about how we act in the world and about how to act in more environmentally conscious ways. What we ought to do, instead, is pay attention to the realm of the human, to the realm of the built environment that we have collectively produced, and ultimately to our human practices. For it is our practices—through which we build—that hold the power of changing the world for the better. Ultimately, for Vogel, the task of environmental philosophy is not to protect an illusory ideal of pure, pre-human nature, but to reckon with the world we have created (a world defined by environmental problems) and to collectively figure out the kind of world we would like to make instead.

It is in the last chapter of the book that Vogel develops his positive vision on how this change might come about. The key move, for him, “is a move from the market to politics,”¹¹ a move from an alienated way of being-in-community where individuals are isolated from each

¹¹ Steven Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall: Environmental Philosophy after the End of Nature*, 222.

other and thus are rendered unable to organize in socially meaningful ways. It is, in other words, a move to a truly democratic organization of the political realm, one in which “the community acts *self-consciously* as a community.”¹² And this means, in a nutshell, that should we engage in conversations with each other, that we must decide *together* how to exist in the world.

Vogel’s diagnosis is that we currently find ourselves in a situation very similar to Hardin’s ‘Tragedy of the Commons.’ It is a “paradox of private individuals with private intentions producing, through their aggregated practices, effects quite different from what they desire.”¹³ There is, then, an uncanny disconnect between intention and effect, a disconnect that is rooted in the privatization of human lives.

Vogel sharply points out that this problem—this paradox—arises as a consequence of being immersed in the structure of the capitalist market—a structure that (1) alienates us from our practices and from our environment to the point where we no longer see that environmental problems are a product of our practices and (2) atomizes individuals to the point where their individual actions have no effect on the large scale of things.

First, it is clear that we are alienated: we don’t recognize ourselves in the environments we create. Global warming is a social product; we made it, it is “a consequence of human decisions and practices.”¹⁴ And yet, “it appears to each of the humans who produce it as an unalterable fact independent of their private choices.”¹⁵ The tragedy of the commons arises

¹² Steven Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall: Environmental Philosophy after the End of Nature*, 223.

¹³ Steven Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall: Environmental Philosophy after the End of Nature*, 224.

¹⁴ Steven Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall: Environmental Philosophy after the End of Nature*, 202.

¹⁵ Steven Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall: Environmental Philosophy after the End of Nature*, 202.

because “my own individual actions, when aggregated with those of my fellow citizens, have public consequences, but since each of us acts *as* a private individual, those consequences appear to each of us as something beyond us, beyond our control and our ability to affect—as an ‘alien power’.”¹⁶ In this alienated model, whatever happens seems inevitable, the result of fate or of a bigger development of history that we cannot stop. Thus, even if “as a society we shape the world,” we do not shape it “in a way we have, as a society, chosen.”¹⁷

Secondly, being immersed in the logic of the market economy makes it impossible to create genuine and meaningful social organization, collaboration, and action against environmental problem. This is his diagnosis. As he puts it, we exist “together” in cities and towns...and yet we are but an aggregation of private individuals. This is, precisely, what gives rise to the tragic situation that is so pervasive in today’s different forms of activism, a situation where actions seem to not have consequences—for we find “people who genuinely want to do the right thing and know what it is but have no way to form an agreement with others to make sure it happens.”¹⁸ Ultimately, insofar as we act as private individuals immersed in the market economy, we are “unable to control the consequences of what they do in the market” and, thus, we find ourselves “faced by a built environment that is harmful, dangerous, and ugly in all the ways we experience today.”¹⁹ When faced—as consumers and producers—with the dilemma of whether to produce less or choose to purchase the more eco-friendly option for the sake of the environment, it turns out that it is irrational to incur in the additional costs of choosing the

¹⁶ Steven Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall: Environmental Philosophy after the End of Nature*, 202.

¹⁷ Steven Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall: Environmental Philosophy after the End of Nature*, 202.

¹⁸ Steven Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall: Environmental Philosophy after the End of Nature*, 220.

¹⁹ Steven Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall: Environmental Philosophy after the End of Nature*, 201.

seemingly more ethical actions, because we cannot expect all the other individual actors to do the same, and therefore our individual action will have no effective consequences. Thus, Vogel writes

The environmentally conscious industrialist or fisherman or commuter...may genuinely desire to decrease pollution, protect the fish, or prevent global warming but is aware that forgoing the new factory, the new fishing technology, or the drive to work by itself will have no significant impact on achieving these goals on the one hand, while it will deeply and negatively affect his or her situation on the other.²⁰

It seems, then, that the only rational choice is to comply with the more individually pragmatic action.

But Vogel calls for turning this alienating structure upside down. If under alienated market conditions it seems like we can only act as isolated individuals who don't understand how our society actually affects the building of the environment, Vogel wants to undo this by undertaking the task of dialogue. What is needed is a society of individuals connected through dialogue, for it is communication that allow us to leave behind the world of isolated individuals and transform the social and political situation because it is only through collaboration that we can put our solutions into practice. It is through the practice of dialogue and the building of society from the ground-up that we can begin to choose and effectively create the kind of world we want to see.

My project is deeply inspired by this desire to leave behind the world of isolated individuals. My aim was to create a sense of community through engaging in DIY practice together which hopefully functioned as be the seed from which an alternative vision might

²⁰ Steven Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall: Environmental Philosophy after the End of Nature*, 201.

sprout. If one of the main obstacles to the possibility of conceiving of ourselves as the makers of our environments is the individualism that is so pervasive today, maybe a tiny grass-root activity focused around human connection and discussion can engage people enough to make us realize that (1) we are not alone and (2) that what we do (together) matters, that it can impact the kind of environment that environs us. I see the act of getting together to craft as a way of fighting against the segregation and the break of community that happens in this society dominated by the market. Of course, the long-term organizational capacities are minimal—but, hopefully, this activity will plant the seed for a more thorough communal organization of our actions. Moreover, the act of creating a reusable bag and conversing about the kinds of bags—and other tools—we use and their effect on the environment is an invitation to reflect on the kind of world we are building through the kinds of things we choose to use (in detriment of other more eco-friendly options). Hopefully, it is also an invitation to be consistent in our use of tools that are better for the environment, an invitation to *build better*.

Environmental Philosophy

In the seminar PHL 522 – Environmental Philosophy we surveyed the history of the field, tackling debates concerning the intrinsic value of nature, environmental virtue ethics, ecofeminism, environmental pragmatism and different accounts on wilderness, as well as questions about environmental justice.

One of the most relevant theoretical questions we studied was the one concerning wilderness debates. Cronon's seminal piece "The Trouble with Wilderness, or Getting Back to the Wrong Nature" articulates this problem very clearly. In this essay, he argues that wilderness is not a pristine realm outside human history, but a cultural construction shaped by romantic and religious imaginaries that separate "nature" from "civilization." However, this separation can have undesirable and harmful consequences: it can make us value only distant, sublime landscapes, such as national parks or monuments, while we disregard everyday spaces. In terms of environmental responsibility, the idea of wilderness can impel us to value only a sort of abstract realm that is always located elsewhere from where human life takes place.

On the contrary, other approaches to environmental philosophy underline the relevance of the social and of place-based particularity for environmental endeavors. Ecofeminism—another of the theories we discussed in this seminar—would be an example of such an approach. Broadly, it is the view that the domination of nature and the oppression of women are interconnected and rooted in the same hierarchical, dualistic structures of thought. Yet, it transcends gender, problematizing other social oppressions as well. As Greta Gaard and Lori Gruen tell us in "Ecofeminism. Toward global justice and planetary health": "ecofeminism's central claim is that these problems stem from the mutually reinforcing oppression of humans and of the natural world." The consequence is that "it is no longer possible to discuss

environmental change without addressing social change; moreover, it is not possible to address women's oppression without addressing environmental degradation."²¹ For the ecofeminists, then, the world of the human and the world of the natural are inextricably interconnected—hence the relevance of addressing social issues and not just issues concerned with an abstract idea of wilderness. Environmental responsibility, then, must also attend to the political structures that shape our everyday life. In this respect, ecofeminism is closely connected to questions of environmental justice. As Gaard and Gruen note, “ecofeminists are especially concerned with environmental racism, defined as “the dumping, siting or placement of environmentally hazardous substances or facilities in the communities of color in North America and around the world, primarily because of the race and powerlessness of people in those communities’.”²²

While ecofeminism focuses on the structural entanglements of social and ecological domination, the question of how to live our lives within these social structures remains. Environmental virtue ethics, as Philip Cafaro tells us, looks at environmental philosophy “from a virtue ethics perspective which focuses on human excellence and flourishing.”²³ Taking seriously the question of virtue ethics— “what is the best life for a person and how can I go about living it? What is a good society and how can we move closer to achieving it?”²⁴— environmental virtue ethicists expand the scope of these inquiries to include our relationship with the more-than-human world. The key idea is that through our environmental decisions we can become better or worse, both as individuals and as a society. Additionally—and crucially—

²¹ Greta Gaard and Lori Gruen, “Ecofeminism: Toward Global Justice and Planetary Health,” 236.

²² Greta Gaard and Lori Gruen, “Ecofeminism: Toward Global Justice and Planetary Health,” 246.

²³ Cafaro, “Thoreau, Leopold, and Carson: Toward an Environmental Virtue Ethics,” 3.

²⁴ Cafaro, “Thoreau, Leopold, and Carson: Toward an Environmental Virtue Ethics,” 4.

environmental virtue ethicists emphasize the joy that emerges from cultivating a sound relationship with nature. Even if it is often the case that environmentalists focus on the negative aspects of environmental protection—such as all the commodities we have to give up for the sake of the environment’s health—, environmental virtue ethicists underline the positive aspects of being environmentally responsible, moving “us toward a more positive, sustainable position of respectful dwelling in nature.”²⁵

This graduate seminar has grounded my CEP in important ways. Inspired by Cronon’s critique of wilderness and the necessity of valuing the environment here and now, within the scope of society, my project has tried to resist the displacement of value that a concept such as ‘wilderness’ might entail. Instead, I have embraced an ecofeminist-inspired view that foregrounds (1) the hierarchical and dualistic structures that shape oppressions of othered peoples within the human polis and of nature and (2) the necessity of addressing environmental harm within the social and economic systems that produce it.

Ecofeminism exposes how the domination of nature is intertwined with other systems of inequality—with hierarchies that also operate within society. These hierarchies articulate and make possible the radical inequality between the global north and the global south, which in turn mean that—as Gaard and Gruen note—not only that “the industrialized countries) the ‘North’) are draining the Third World (the ‘South’) of resources,”[24] but also that the difference in consumption is just as enormous as it is obscene. According to Margarita Arias, “a person in the North consumes 52 times as much meat, 115 times more paper, and 35 times more energy than a

²⁵ Cafaro, “Thoreau, Leopold, and Carson: Toward an Environmental Virtue Ethics,” 5.

Latin American.”²⁶ Overconsumption is the norm in the global North, and even more so in the United States, a country whose residents produce, on average, more than half a ton of solid waste per year.²⁷

In this regard, my project addresses this social problem—the problem of waste and, more specifically, the problem of single-use plastic—that is so grounded on social inequalities that expand well beyond the global North. The ecofeminist analysis tells us that overconsumption and waste are grounded in an othering of nature and of marginalized human communities, an othering that renders it acceptable (1) to break open and use the earth as landfill and (2) to send our waste to third-world countries. These injustices—social and ecological—make it relevant to engage our community in efforts towards plastic reduction.

Environmental virtue ethics also have played a crucial role, for it is not enough to simply denounce injustices, inequalities and overconsumption that most people are already aware of. In a way, my project sought to cultivate forms of action that shape moral character and orient individuals toward ecological responsibility. Indeed, as Holmes Rolston III writes, “there is always something wrong with callous destruction.”²⁸ And there is something eminently destructive in the way we consume and produce waste in the global North. Thus, to become aware of these and engage in zero-waste practices is to cultivate ecological virtue. Additionally, in the two workshops I sought to cultivate a sense of shared joy, community, and well-being that emerges from engaging in modest DIY practices. The way I envisioned the project, these

²⁶ Greta Gaard and Lori Gruen, “Ecofeminism: Toward Global Justice and Planetary Health,” 235.

²⁷ Greta Gaard and Lori Gruen, “Ecofeminism: Toward Global Justice and Planetary Health,” 235.

²⁸ Holmes Rolston III, “Environmental Virtue Ethics: Half the Truth but Dangerous as a Whole,” 67.

activities were not just practical alternatives to single-use plastic; they were also occasions for reorienting participants' relationship to material consumption. And, ultimately, by collectively transforming discarded t-shirts into reusable bags, participants were invited to become more attentive to the volume of plastic they produce and, in doing so, we had the opportunity to practice forms of care and embody a joyful ecological virtue.

Topics in Value Theory

The third seminar that inspired my project was PHL xxx—Topics in Value Theory. While taking this course last fall, we read together *Reasoning: A Social Picture*, by Anthony S. Laden. In his book, Laden defends a conception of reason that is not so much a static faculty of the mind but an activity, an activity whose central components include “proposing, engaging, conversing, and other activities of mutual attunement, rather than calculating, deducing, problem-solving, and judging.”²⁹

This conception of reason stands in contrast to what he terms ‘the standard picture of reasoning,’ which is the view that reasoning is something an individual does internally, arriving at conclusions through logic and then presenting them to others as finished products. Against this picture, Laden insists that reasoning is irreducibly social, something that only emerges in the context of a relationship, an activity we do together rather than alone. One of the key points of this conception, as I understand it, is that reasoning is not about an individual imposing its reasons upon another, about convincing through the force of cogent, logical argument that comes from within the internal reason of an individual; instead, reasoning is something that only emerges in the context of a relationship with another—it is an activity we do together, socially, an activity “of responsive engagement and attunement,”³⁰ a genuine attempt to live together.

Crucially, Laden presents his conception of reasoning as taking place through invitations. The authority of reasoning is not grounded in a hierarchical relationship that gives the presumably more rational person the ability to command others. Reasoning, for Laden, does not

²⁹ Laden, *Reasoning: A Social Picture*, 8.

³⁰ Laden, *Reasoning: A Social Picture*, 9.

give one the right to direct things, no one can rightly occupy the place of legislator. Instead, reasoning's authority is radically different from the authority of legislating, for it is an authority that emerges from the act of inviting another and of the acceptance of an invitation.

Through invitation, one invites others to “take my words as speaking for you,” opening up “a space of reasons for us to share” and construct together.³¹ Thus, it implies that I must present my proposal/invitation in a way that resonates with the other I want to convince. In this respect, a central theme is Laden's use of *ideals* or *realistic utopias*, which are “descriptions of a world or a social order or, in this case, an activity that we might construct or engage in...”³² When we reason with each other, we should present our proposals in a way that is enticing. For, again, we are inviting others to adopt our ideal.

Ideals, for Laden, are not normative in advance. Instead, they are descriptive of possibilities that often draw on our current practices but also extend beyond them. Yet, they aren't merely descriptive either: it is by presenting attractive possibilities that they acquire a kind of normative force. In Laden's own words, “their normativity comes from their attractiveness, not by being required.”³³ To put forth an ideal is not simply a matter of argument or prescription, but the extension of an invitation. It is about presenting others to attractive possibilities of how we might live.

Because ideals have to be attractive, and to be attractive they have to be tenable. Thus, rather than being abstract or distant goals, ideals ought to be realistic “in the sense that it can be

³¹ Laden, *Reasoning: A Social Picture*, 11.

³² Laden, *Reasoning: A Social Picture*, 43.

³³ Laden, *Reasoning: A Social Picture*, 44.

realized, acted upon, right now, by anyone.”³⁴ The point of the ideal, in other words, isn’t to set some distant, maybe unreachable vision, but to affect the way we act *today, here and now*.

Laden’s social picture of reasoning has shaped my project many ways. Reasoning, as we have seen, is not something an individual does alone but an activity that only emerges in the context of a relationship. In a similar way, the workshop format was not intended to be merely a practical vehicle for conveying information about zero-waste alternatives. It was meant to be an instance of reasoning together. By gathering participants around a shared, hands-on activity, the workshops were a space in which participants were not recipients of a pre-formed argument but active interlocutors in a conversation about how we might live differently, a conversation where we would come up with a shared vision of a good life. Also, engaging in the DIY activity created the conditions for the kind of mutual attunement Laden describes.

The notion of ideals as “realistic utopias” is significant, for it emphasizes the fact that reasoning as an ideal ought to inspire us in a way that manifests in our actions in the present moment. This was in the backdrop of my project. Rather than confronting participants with abstract statistics about plastic waste or distant visions of a zero-waste society, I wanted to present them with an immediately realizable alternative, one that could be acted upon right now, in this room, with these materials. The act of transforming a discarded t-shirt into a reusable bag is, in my view, precisely this kind of realistic utopia, because it does not ask participants to imagine a radically different world but invites them to enact one, modestly and tangibly, in the present moment. The choice of simplifying the project as much as possible partly responded to this desire to make it as tenable as possible. Another aspect of conceiving of the project as a

³⁴ Laden, *Reasoning: A Social Picture*, 44.

realistic utopia was that I intended to present this sort of environmental virtue as something desirable. The workshops provided a space for this. Thus, the normative force of the project, to use Laden's terms, came from attraction (and not from obligation), from the pleasure of making something together, from the sense that this is something worth doing.

Finally, I want to consider another of Laden's points: that reasoning is social, and hence that it is a shared activity, a conversation in which the participants must aim to be intelligible to one another—for "sharing a space of meaning in this sense means not only not having a private language, but not using language privately. In other words, if I am interested in making myself intelligible to you, I not only have to use a language you know, but use it in a way that you recognize."³⁵ Using language in a way that is both recognizable and compelling to others appears to be a necessary condition for allowing any ideal to have an effect on the way we act or live now. This insight has inspired my project deeply. When doing activism or trying to promote change, what we are doing is trying to convey almost utopian possibilities to others—and oftentimes people struggle to understand us. But, if Laden is right, we must express these possibilities in ways that are compelling and recognizable to our audiences if we want to inspire action now. Thus, Laden's idea that ideals work by attraction rather than obligation seems useful.

Taking this seriously, I saw the project as an attempt to come up with the kind of invitation to the participants would genuinely want to accept (as opposed to merely arguing in favor of the virtues of not using plastic and providing a list of reasons in favor of zero-waste). The choice of material, for instance, responded to this insight: instead of purchasing new materials, we worked with discarded shirts—something that almost everybody has at home—which, I hope, makes it

³⁵ Laden, *Reasoning: A Social Picture*, 18.

more likely for people to agree to such a project—it is non-discriminatory, anyone can do it. In a similar way, for the workshop at Sussex School I adapted my language as much as possible to make it resonate with the kids. Furthermore, presenting environmental concerns and the imperative to be better humans through a fun DIY activity made them more eager and more responsive to the invitation I was bringing forth.

4. *Actions Taken*

The idea for my project started to develop in the fall semester of 2025. I got involved with the UM Office of Sustainability, helping them monitor composting during several football games. The experience was revealing. Despite the availability of plenty of clearly labeled bins and volunteers stationed nearby, many attendees showed little interest in separating their waste. The enormous scale of disposable containers—food trays, cups, plastic wrappers, straws, and such—made visible the normalization of disposability within collective events. This experience sedimented the desire to tackle this issue in my CEP.

My engagement consisted of two workshops in which participants could create reusable tote bags from old t-shirts—workshops that tried to encourage the use of reusable bags as opposed to plastic bags. Interestingly, I had first envisioned crafting bags out of macrame cord using the macrame technique—a crafting style I have been practicing since I was 18. However, this kind of creation would have required acquiring (preferably organic) macrame cotton cord, which in a certain sense would have defeated the purpose of engaging in a zero-waste practice. Cotton production, even if organic, can lead to significant water depletion. Moreover, organic cotton has lower environmental impact per hectare of land, but because it usually produces lower yields, it can have higher impact per kilogram of cotton produced. Thus, finding a different material to work with—something we all already had, something that has been forgotten and was perhaps waiting to be reinvented—seemed like a better idea. After doing some research in the DIY world, I found the perfect solution: a tutorial for a no-sew t-shirt tote.

The first workshop took place on Sunday, April 5th at UM's FLAT (Forum for Living with Appropriate Technology) house. A small group of people gathered in the backyard of the FLAT house, and I guided them through the steps of creating a tote bag out of a shirt using only

scissors. The process was not too difficult: first we cut off the sleeves, then we cut slits from the bottom of the shirt about $\frac{3}{4}$ to 1 inch apart, creating a fringe. Then came the (somewhat tricky) knotting: we had to make several knots with the strands in order to close the bottom of the shirt. Finally, we turned the shirt over and voilà! A funky tote bag had appeared. While we crafted our tote bags, I guided a conversation where we reflected on the relevance of engaging in small actions such as this craft and the subsequent commitment to reuse, in actions that oftentimes seem meaningless and futile—especially when neither the companies that produce much of the waste nor our institutions appear to be interested in changing our current practices.

When I was organizing the first workshop, I met Ceci, a member of the FLAT and a graduate student in Education. She is also a music teacher at Sussex Elementary School in Missoula, and together we planned a second workshop with the kids of her school during their 2026 Climate and Arts Symposium Day. This workshop took place on Friday, April 17th. Roughly twenty-five students partook in the activity (ranging from kindergarteners to eighth graders). We guided them through the same no-sew process: cutting off the sleeves, fringing the bottom, knotting the strands closed. When asked about plastic and its effects on the environment, the kids did not appear to be uninformed: many already knew that plastic ends up in the ocean and harms marine life. The workshop offered an opportunity to reaffirm that this is a problem and that there are little actions that we can do from our homes that can be both fun and helpful for the environment. I presented it to them as chance to do something with what they already knew, that is, to transform a discarded shirt into something useful and to experience, however briefly, that it is possible to create from scratch and that we can turn away from mere consumerism.

5. *Accomplishments and challenges*

In our world, I find it that all desire to be more eco-friendly is challenging—for it is not obvious what it is best to do. Throughout the process of deciding to have this CEP be about plastic waste and articulating and executing it I have kept delving deeper and deeper in plastic-waste related research, only to find that it is not obviously the case that using less plastic will have any meaningful effects on the environment.

In her book *Not the End of the World*, environmental scientist and data analyst Hannah Ritchie writes that “the data shows us that the occasional plastic carrier bag is not that big a deal. In fact, in many ways, a single-use plastic bag is better than some alternatives. At least when it comes to the carbon footprint, it’s much lower than the rest.”³⁶ This, of course, comes as no surprise: in order to ‘break even’ with the plastic carrier, one needs to use a paper bag several times, and a cotton one tens to hundreds of times. Thus, it is not so clear that plastic bags are that bad for the environment. Moreover, even if there is a real and acute problem with plastic in general and plastic bags in particular (especially that they pollute our waterways, our oceans, affecting all sorts of sea life), this problem only arises—Hannah Ritchie contends—when we don’t manage plastic adequately after use. And the data shows that “this is a problem in low- to middle-income countries where the use of plastic bags is on the rise but the infrastructure to deal with the waste is not.”³⁷ It is only in these countries, and not in our context in a developed nation

³⁶ Hannah Ritchie, *Not the End of the World: How We Can Be the First Generation to Build a Sustainable Planet*, 53.

³⁷ Hannah Ritchie, *Not the End of the World: How We Can Be the First Generation to Build a Sustainable Planet*, 53.

such as the United States, that “tight rules on single-use plastic bags, and the availability of alternatives, really make a difference.”³⁸

Gaining this information, evidently, challenged my project in that it questioned my belief that striving for less waste—both in an individual and a societal level—is valuable. Were plastic-waste reduction proved to be valueless, my project would in turn become more obviously meaningless. And, in a way, I think this is what happened: the inconsequentialism only became more evident, making it harder to believe in the project itself.

And yet, in a different way, this challenge helped me understand that, at its core, this CEP intended to emerge as an invitation to the cultivation of environmental virtue. In the age of consumerism, emphasizing simplicity and reusability should remain a virtuous act. In an age of plastic damage, saying no to plastic—even if the countries we live in aren’t *as* guilty of polluting the ocean—should remain a virtuous act. Moreover, saying no to plastic can be understood as part of a broader development of our communities, that being one amongst a myriad of more environmentally friendly practices. And it should be kept in mind that, even if the numbers are lower here, we still litter our waterways in first world countries, and *every single animal affected by us, every ecosystem*—be it in southeast Asia or in a beach in the West Coast—should attest to our infinite responsibility to be better, more virtuous human beings.

On the logistical side, it is always challenging to organize, coordinate and lead events. For instance, it was not easy to find a venue, and being a shy person, it is always somewhat

³⁸ Hannah Ritchie, *Not the End of the World: How We Can Be the First Generation to Build a Sustainable Planet*,

strange to come up to the venue space coordinator and say ‘hey, I have a proposal for you.’ First, I thought the Maker’s Space at the UC would be an appropriate place, but even if the director of the space agreed they did not seem all that happy about it. Fortunately, I knew someone at the FLAT and they put me in contact with Ceci, another resident at the FLAT in charge of organizing workshops in their spaces, and she was eager to work with me. Her immediate support and her further suggestion that we did a version of the activity at her school with young kids really helped articulate and develop this project.

Another remarkable challenge was leading a big group of kids. While engaging them in our short conversation about plastic pollution wasn’t particularly hard—most of them had something to say, a thought to share, or a question to ask about plastic—making sure each of them understood the steps of the bag-making process, that they were handling the scissors safely, etc., was a difficult task. I could not have done it without Ceci. I am extremely grateful for her support.

Ultimately, I think the biggest accomplishment of this project was being able to engage a group of more than 25 kids in a conversation about our environmental duties and showing them that DIY activities can be truly fun. I am confident that small events like this one will play a role in inspiring environmental concerns in the youngest amongst us, that at least some of those 25 will understand their place in the web of all earth things in a humbler, more planet-caring way. Hopefully, regardless of whether or not a DIY tote bag *truly* changes the world, the act of making one will plant a seed.

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